

## Andean Report by Valerie Rush

### Are CAP's days numbered?

*As economic and political discontent soars, Venezuela's exemplary "democracy" is threatened with dissolution.*

**A** collapse of living standards in the once "middle class" developing nation of Venezuela is triggering mass street protests, violence, and growing speculation that a military coup—once considered unthinkable in this "democracy"—is now a distinct possibility.

When Socialist International Vice President Carlos Andrés Pérez recaptured the Venezuelan presidency in 1989, he "discovered" that the International Monetary Fund—once portrayed as the nemesis of his 1974-79 administration—had now reformed its genocidal ways and become "more humane." Pérez (or CAP, as he is known in Venezuela) proceeded to embrace a brutal IMF "adjustment program," which in short order extended the category of "extreme poverty" to 43% of the Venezuelan population.

The result? According to official figures, at least one child a day starves to death in Venezuela, malnutrition levels have reached portions of the population which had never before known hunger, and "Third World diseases" like malaria, once thought eradicated, have reappeared.

Strikes in nearly every major sector of the economy have been sweeping the country, and students have joined forces with the growing ranks of the poor to hold mass demonstrations against CAP's austerity policies. The government has indefinitely suspended all high school and university classes. In the past two months, 12 students and a soldier have been killed in violent confrontations, reviving

fears of a new "Caracazo"—the four days of street protests in Caracas against a 100% rise in food prices, which left as many as 1,000 dead.

Making this unrest such a volatile mixture is the simultaneous rising discontent of the Venezuelan military. The Argentine daily *Ambito Financiero* reported Nov. 28 that "yesterday, practically for the first time in the recent history of that country, the military publicly expressed its discontent with the wages situation of the Armed Forces."

And commenting on the increasingly violent street protests, a retired senior military officer quoted by the Nov. 30 *Washington Post* warned: "All I know is that the army will not turn on the people again. 1989 was very traumatic for the armed forces. If it comes to that, they will go to Miraflores [the presidential palace], not the streets." The paper added: "Analysts said such talk has previously served to dramatize discontent, rather than indicate a threat by any important sector of the military. But some observers said that, for the first time, they could not rule out the possibility of military action."

Whether or not the military is seriously considering action against the corrupt CAP government, there is nervousness in high circles of power, both at home and abroad. Reports violence have caused Venezuelan debt paper to tumble on the Wall Street exchanges, while Venezuelan newspapers report that CAP—now said to be afflicted with the "George Bush syndrome"—is globe-trotting while his

country burns.

On Nov. 16, prominent historian and politician Arturo Usler Pietri warned that deterioration of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government had reached such levels that the possibility of a coup d'état could not be ruled out. He urged purges of all three branches, starting with the judiciary, as a means of reclaiming the people's confidence in democratic rule. "Without emergency solutions to the crisis, we may have a coup," Usler Pietri insisted.

Venezuelan Attorney General and former Foreign Minister Ramón Escovar Salom held an emergency press conference in late November on the coup warnings. While doubting the likelihood of a coup, Escovar nonetheless observed that "the fact that it is being talked about after 30 years of stability is a signal that we are in a serious national emergency that is becoming more explosive by the day." Escovar reportedly blasted CAP for "turning a deaf ear" to urgent social demands, and he sharply criticized CAP's foreign policy as offering no solution to the country's ills.

Escovar was undoubtedly referring to CAP's new incarnation as traveling salesman for George Bush's new world order. Not only has the Venezuelan President attached himself to the hind-parts of Bush's Enterprise for the Americas Initiative, winning kudos from the international creditor banks for his fine performance on their behalf. CAP is also in the vanguard of those Ibero-Americans cheering on Bush's genocidal adventures abroad. Thus, at the just-concluded meeting of the "Rio Group" in Cartagena, CAP insisted: "It is better that the [Haitian] people suffer now with an embargo which should be turned into a blockade." Small wonder that 75 of the 100 Haitians offered refuge in Venezuela have opted for a return flight home!